

SHARE:



PEDIATRICS

Navigating Autism

FSU researchers are studying how to diagnose autism earlier to get children the help they need sooner.

Mike Brassfield | 8/31/2024

NEVER MISS A FEATURE: SUBSCRIBE TO FLORIDA TREND

More children in Florida are being diagnosed with autism than ever before. Fortunately, two professors at Florida State University are researching how to diagnose it earlier, and how to teach autistic children once they're in school.

One out of every 36 kids in the U.S. has autism, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced last year. That's a significant increase from the CDC's estimate of 1 in 44 children in 2021 — and a huge jump from 1 in 110 children back in 2006.

That doesn't mean there's an autism epidemic, though. Researchers say more children are being diagnosed with autism simply because there's more awareness of autism spectrum disorder now, and pediatricians are getting better at spotting it. There's no simple test for autism, so diagnosing it requires using observational techniques.

Five years old is the average age for an autism diagnosis in the U.S., but Amy Wetherby knows that in many cases the condition could have been spotted a lot earlier than that — and that could have made a difference.

“We know that early detection of autism is crucial for improving treatment for children,” says Wetherby, who is a distinguished research professor in FSU's College of Medicine and the director of FSU's Autism Institute. “By identifying autism early, intervention can take advantage of the plasticity of the brain in the first three years of life. With early diagnosis and intervention, children with autism are more likely able to be included in regular classrooms from preschool to kindergarten and beyond.”

That's why Wetherby has spent years developing screening tools for autism and communication delays in children 9-24 months of age. She and the team at FSU's Autism Institute have created two online tools for the general public: Autism Navigator (autismnavigator.com) and Baby Navigator (babynavigator.com).

Baby Navigator is a free website for parents to join from pregnancy to 18 months of age and to use until their baby is 3 years old. Focusing on early language development, it helps parents track when

their child is supposed to reach certain milestones. “It helps them identify what their child should be learning,” Wetherby says. “We also have an online set of videos to help families support their baby’s learning in everyday activities.”

Autism Navigator has an extensive library of videos demonstrating signs of autism and teaching strategies for diagnosing it. It also has autism-related resources for families. The website supports itself by charging out-of-state medical practitioners for the professional development lessons it provides. It’s free for Floridians because it was developed using state funding.

“We have all these side-by-side videos illustrating the early signs of autism — here’s a typical child, here’s a child with early signs,” Wetherby says.

The professor has been working on these issues for 45 years. “By the time a lot of kids get diagnosed, they completely miss the opportunity for early intervention,” she says. “The brain is developing the fastest in the first few years of life. If children are not in a good learning environment, then they’re not going to be forming all the circuits in the brain that are needed to do well in school and to succeed in life.”

Speaking of learning environments: Veronica Fleury, an associate professor in FSU’s College of Education, Health and Human Sciences, is studying how to best teach autistic children, focusing on how shared book reading with adults contributes to children’s early literacy skills.

Here’s a question she gets asked from time to time: Is there an epidemic of autism? And her answer is no. The increase in autism cases, she says, is largely due to advances in diagnostic methods and more public awareness.

“The reality is, these are kids who have always been there,” Fleury says. “We’re just doing a better job of identifying them.”

Autism In America

- » 1 in 36 — Children in the U.S. who have autism, up from the previous rate of 1 in 44
- » 1 in 45 — Adults in the U.S. who have autism
- » 2 — Age at which autism can be reliably diagnosed
- » 5 — Average age of autism diagnosis
- » 4 to 1 — Male-to-female ratio in autism
- » 6.7% — People with autism spectrum disorder who have profound autism
- » 74% — Autistic students who graduate with a high school diploma, versus 86% of all students

All figures are for the United States. Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S.



Tags: [Healthcare](#), [Pediatrics](#), [Feature](#)

Obesity is weighing down Florida's economy. How to shrink the numbers

Major publishers sue Florida over 'unconstitutional' book ban law

With prices high and supply low, can Florida expect help from Harris, Trump housing plans?

Sunshine state consumer confidence continues ascent

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

[READ THE SEPTEMBER ISSUE »](#)

[ACCESS AN ISSUE](#)

FLORIDA TREND MAGAZINE

- [LAST MONTH'S ISSUE](#)
- [SUBSCRIBE NOW!](#)
- [BUY A SINGLE ISSUE](#)
- [GET DIGITAL ACCESS](#)

